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## **“[D]EATH FELL ON MAN ALONE” – RE-READING MARY SHELLEY’S THE LAST MAN DURING A GLOBAL COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

There are many works of literature which give us detailed accounts of plague, as epidemic and even pandemic (Decameron, Journal of a Plague Year, The Plague). However, Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* is the first plague narrative to depict a global pandemic. Moreover, it interrogates a world before nineteenth-century globalization by prophesying a future in 2073. Shelley’s frame narrative shows the reader an alternate history where the hegemony of free-market capitalism and Darwinian evolutionary science do not exist. What can this fictional world without capitalism and evolutionary theory tell us?

This article engages in a qualitative critical analysis of *The Last Man* from the field of literature and science. First, as a novel, Shelley addresses both the individual perspective of the isolated narrator-witness, and, at a wider level, the society that dissolves around the protagonist. This literary unpacking of the novel suggests McKeon’s naïve and sceptical empiricism as useful in interrogating both fictionality and any basis for interpretation of empirical, factual evidence mediated through human narrative in the text. Second, Shelley draws on the competing theories of proto-evolutionary science of the 1820s: Huttonian eternalism, Cuvierian catastrophism and Lamarckian transformism. Shelley’s reworkings of nineteenth-century natural philosophy allow us to re-evaluate our relationship with nature from a paradigm before evolutionary theory. This history-of-science approach interrogates the novel as both methodology and content. Indeed, I argue that Shelley’s proto science fiction classic can help us re-interrogate our own dominant cultural and ideological assumptions in the midst of the current Covid-19 global pandemic.

**Key words:** Pandemic, Covid-19, Shelley, frame narrative, naïve and sceptical empiricism, proto-evolutionary science, Hutton, Cuvier, Lamarck, eternalism, catastrophism, transformism

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### **«Ажал тек адамға ғана тиді»: ғаламдық пандемия кезінде М. Шеллидің «Соңғы адам» фильмін қайталау**

Обаны эпидемия және тіпті пандемия ретінде егжей-тегжейлі сипаттайтын көптеген әдеби шығармалар бар (Декамерон, Оба жылының журналы, Оба). Алайда, Мэри Шеллидің «Соңғы адам» – бұл дүниежүзілік пандемияны бейнелейтін алғашқы оба хикаясы. Оның үстіне, ол 2073 жылғы болашақты болжай отырып, XIX ғасырдың жаһандануына дейінгі әлемді зерттейді. Шеллидің әңгімесі оқырманға нарықтық капитализм мен дарвиндік эволюциялық ғылымның гегемониясы жоқ альтернативті оқиғаны көрсетеді. Бұл ойдан шығарылған әлем бізге капитализм мен эволюция теориясынсыз не айта алады?

Бұл мақалада әдебиет пен ғылым саласынан «Соңғы адамға» сыни талдау жасалған. Біріншіден, роман ретінде Шелли оқшауланған куәгердің жеке көзқарасына, сонымен қатар кейіпкердің айналасында еритін қоғамға кеңірек жүгінеді. Романның осы әдеби ашылуы Мак Кеонның аңғалдық пен скептикалық эмпиризмнің көркем мәтінді де, мәтін бойынша адамның баяндауымен жүзеге асатын эмпирикалық фактілерді түсіндіру үшін де пайдалы екенін көрсетеді. Екіншіден, Шелли 1820 жылдардағы протоэволюциялық ғылымның бәсекелес теорияларына сүйенеді: Хаттонның мәңгілік, Кювье апаты және Ламарк трансформизмі сияқты. Шеллидің XIX ғасырдағы қайта қаралған натурфилософиясы бізге табиғатпен қарым-қатынасымызды парадигмадан эволюция теориясына дейін қайта қарауға мүмкіндік береді. Бұл ғылыми негізделген тәсіл романның методологиясын да, мазмұнын да зерттейді. Шын мәнінде, автор Шеллидің прото-ғылыми фантастика классикасы қазіргі жаһандық Covid-19 пандемиясының ортасында қоғамға және жеке адамға өзінің үстем мәдени және идеологиялық болжамдарын қайта қарауға көмектесе алады деп тұжырымдайды.

**Түйін сөздер:** пандемия, Ковид-19, Шелли, кадрлық баяндау, аңғалдық пен скептикалық эмпиризм, протоэволюциялық ғылым, Хаттон, Кювье, Ламарк, мәңгілік, катастрофизм, трансформизм.

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**«Смерть пала только на человека»: перечитывая «Последнего человека»  
М. Шелли во время глобальной пандемии**

Есть много литературных произведений, которые подробно описывают чуму как эпидемию и даже пандемию (Декамерон, Журнал года чумы, Чума). Однако «Последний человек» Мэри Шелли – это первое повествование о чуме, изображающее глобальную пандемию. Более того, он исследует мир до глобализации девятнадцатого века, предсказывая будущее в 2073 году. Повествование Шелли показывает читателю альтернативную историю, в которой не существует гегемонии рыночного капитализма и дарвиновской эволюционной науки. Что может сказать нам этот вымышленный мир без капитализма и теории эволюции?

В данной статье проводится критический анализ «Последнего человека» из области литературы и науки. Во-первых, как роман, Шелли обращается к индивидуальной точке зрения изолированного рассказчика-свидетеля, а также на более широком уровне к обществу, которое растворяется вокруг главного героя. Такое литературное раскрытие романа предполагает, что наивный и скептический эмпиризм Мак Кеона полезен для исследования как вымысла, так и любых оснований для интерпретации эмпирических фактов, опосредованных человеческим повествованием в тексте. Во-вторых, Шелли опирается на конкурирующие теории протоэволюционной науки 1820-х годов: как хаттоновский этернализм, катастрофизм Кювье и ламарковский трансформизм. Переработанная Шелли натурфилософия девятнадцатого века позволяет нам переоценить наши отношения с природой с парадигмы до теории эволюции. Такой подход, основанный на истории науки, исследует роман как методологию, так и содержание. На самом деле автор утверждает, что классика протонаучной фантастики Шелли может помочь обществу и человеку пересмотреть собственные доминирующие культурные и идеологические предположения в разгар нынешней глобальной пандемии Covid-19.

**Ключевые слова:** пандемия, Covid-19, Шелли, фрейм-повествование, наивный и скептический эмпиризм, протоэволюционная наука, Хаттон, Кювье, Ламарк, этернализм, катастрофизм, трансформизм

## Introduction

Death fell on man alone, Shelley's writes in *The Last Man* (1993: 216). In recent months, we all have both witnessed and shared stories of a contemporary pandemic that has effected humans as individuals and as societies as a whole. As growth and human activity has been reduced in order to counter the global pandemic, the natural world has, in contrast, recovered temporarily from the imminent brink of global climate catastrophe. Images of wildlife returning to human environments raise questions of dominant economic and ideological structures such as global capitalism and evolutionary theory. Keeling (2017: 3) writes of *The Last Man* that "geo-disaster is visited specifically on human and individual worlds". That "death fell on man alone" (Shelley, 1993: 216) reminds us that revisiting Shelley's proto science fiction classic can help us re-interrogate our own dominant cultural and ideological assumptions in the midst of the current Covid-19 global pandemic.

There are many works of literature which give us detailed accounts of plague, as epidemic and even pandemic (*Decameron, Journal of a Plague*

*Year, The Plague*). However, Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* is the first plague literature to depict a true global pandemic. It interrogates a world before nineteenth-century globalization by prophesying a future long after in 2073. This article engages in a qualitative critical analysis of *The Last Man* from the field of literature and science. This is in order to assess whether potential lessons can be learned from a seminal text featuring a global pandemic nearly 200 years ago. Indeed, Shelley's frame narrative shows the reader an alternate history where the hegemony of free-market capitalism and Darwinian evolutionary science appear not to have ever occurred historically. What can this fictional world without global capitalism and evolutionary theory tell us about our own contemporary reality where "the new normal" questions existing paradigms of economic growth and scientific progress?

First, as a novel, Shelley addresses both the individual perspective of the isolated narrator-witness, and, at a wider level, the society that dissolves around the protagonist-narrator. The frame exposition of the novel interrogates both its own fictionality and any basis for interpretation of empirical, factual evidence which is constantly

mediated through human narrative. McKeon (2000) terms this as *naïve* and *sceptical empiricism* in *The Theory of the Novel*. Does the paradoxical play on empirical truth and fictionality contra factuality in Shelley still engage us the reader’s context today? Second, Shelley draws on the competing theories of proto-evolutionary science in an age before Darwin’s theory of evolution. The parallels in climate catastrophe and extreme events in *The Last Man* and the expectation of catastrophe contra gradual decline into a non-human world are discussed. The geology and proto-evolutionary science of Hutton, Cuvier and Lamarck are contrasted as dominant science discourses of the 1820s. I suggest Shelley speaks to us today as individuals, as a society, and in our relationship with nature.

### Pandemic Literature

Two clear narrative constructions meet in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826). First, the drama of lastness which the protagonist, Lionel, compares to Defoe’s arch-capitalist and proto-colonist *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). This is in part the castaway narrative now familiar in popular culture, e.g. survival reality television shows and advertising etc. Second, the plague narrative which, again, Lionel intertextually compares to its antecedents in Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1349-51), Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year* (1772), and Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn* (1799). Much recent cultural commentary has focused on revisiting works of plague literature during the current global pandemic. Where sales of Camus’ *The Plague* (1958) have increased exponentially, Shelley’s *The Last Man* has received less attention. This article contests that, in representing a literary global pandemic and extinction drama, *The Last Man* is deserving of critical attention in unpacking our own cultural milieu and assumptions.

Shelley’s novel differs from textual predecessors in becoming an extinction narrative. It goes beyond Boccaccio, Defoe and Brockden Brown insofar as a localized epidemic or pandemic becomes a truly global pandemic of proportions associated with creation narratives such as Noah in the Old Testament and Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*. As extinction narrative, Shelley interacts with the current global health pandemic in ways preceding plague literature does not. By marrying the castaway narrative of *Robinson Crusoe* with natural disasters and global pandemic, Shelley bequeaths to world literature a sub-genre that has proved to have lasting appeal. Indeed, I suggest that in 2020 Shelley’s fiction carries increasing

relevance. There are many twentieth and twenty-first century examples of Shelley’s extinction drama worthy of note and discussion: *Planet of the Apes* (1968), Margaret Atwood’s books *Oryx and Crake* (2003) and *Year of the Flood* (2009) etc. The rich tradition spawning from Shelley testifies to a lasting sub-genre of increasing relevance in popular culture throughout the twentieth and into a twenty-first century setting; a century now imprinted with the results of viral pandemics, SARS and Covid-19, on individuals, social and societal structures, and the environment.

*The Last Man* was written between February 1824 and November 1825 (Shelley, 1944: 431). In it Shelley processes feelings of loss and isolation after husband Percy Bysshe Shelley’s death aboard the *Don Juan* in 1822, and Byron’s illness and death in April 1824. It seems probable that Shelley started writing *The Last Man* in conjunction with Byron’s illness, but her journals and letters never make this clear. (Keeling, 2017: 81) She refers to it as “my Sibylline Leaves” (Shelley, 1964: 508) in a letter to John Howard Payne; Coleridge refers himself in the Preface of said work to his “fragmentary and widely scattered” works. Shelley had read Buffon’s *Théorie de la terre* included in *Histoire naturelle* (1749). Buffon’s idea of a cooling earth a “sublime but gloomy theory” (Shelley, 1964: 495-502) seemed more plausible to the Shelleys than Saussure’s interpretation of advance and recession. This bleak doom awaiting the earth permeates the power of Percy’s poetry in *Mont Blanc* and Mary’s descriptions in *Frankenstein*. Much of it persists in the Buffonian “degradation” of humanity evident in *The Last Man*. Moreover, it demonstrates Mary Shelley’s familiarity with theories of the earth and natural history. Buffon appears in Mary Shelley’s reading for 1817 after this journey. (Keeling, 2017: 82) Indeed, it is a global pandemic from the East that Shelley uses as metaphor for her individual sense of loss, isolation and hopelessness. From the moment the capitalized word “PLAGUE” appears (Shelley, 1993: 139) – screaming out on the page, if unspoken in the narrative – *The Last Man* finally becomes the book for which the reader has waited. The roman á clef of Volume I dissipates and the reader’s mind is fixed, just like Lionel’s in “an indefinable anxiety to behold the catastrophe” (Shelley, 1993: 139). From this moment on, the book launches its plague narrative, and with it the modern reader from the time of Corona is swept along.

Its premise, that of a pandemic accompanied by large-scale natural disasters, speaks the vocabulary of 2020, of climate catastrophe and Covid-19. The

success of the virus narrative and last-man narrative hinge upon the equal promise of destruction and salvation. Inasmuch as the narratives are presented as inevitabilities, in both title and frame, catastrophe is assured. However, in the existence of an extant text and a world in which to discover it, there is the promise of avoidability. It is the successful mixture of inevitability and avoidability that underpins plot tension. Similarly, it is these two notions that fixate the modern mind. To what extent is climate catastrophe inevitable? To what degree is it avoidable? Moreover, do we need an ideological shift in order to meet these challenges more successfully? The same may be said of “the new normal” in a post-Corona society.

### Naïve and sceptical empiricism

There were four editions of *The Last Man* published between 1826 and 1833. (Shelley, 1993: xi) Mary Shelley has a very clear textual meaning in mind: “the lovely and sublime objects of nature have been my best inspirers & wanting these I am lost” she writes (Shelley, 1947: 476). Indeed, Buffon’s slowing cooling earth theory and degradation of species – including humans – informs Shelley’s bleakest drama. *The Last Man* begins as travel writing; narrator and companion cross the Bay of Naples to visit “the antiquities which are scattered on the shores of Baiae” (Shelley, 1993: 5). The frame sets up an accidental archaeological find of contradictory nature. The year is 1818. The companions discover fragments of a narrative on bits of leaves and bark in a cave, supposedly the Sybil’s cave, near Naples. These Buffonian “monuments” discovered in a cave unlock a narrative “unintelligible in their pristine condition” (Shelley, 1993: 8) and therefore interpreted by human understanding and context. Indeed, the narrator confesses to piecing back together the fragments creatively, as they are written in both ancient and modern scripts. These “monuments” prove to be those “of a foregone race” (Shelley, 1993: 310) that make up the main narrative. However, they evidentially collapse a linear temporality of past and future. In fact, they reveal a story set in the future, but paradoxically recovered from the past. In the reconstructed story, the first-person narrator, Lionel Verney, witnesses the slow decline of the human race due to a global pandemic, and a world thrown into disorder and chaos. He finally becomes the last man and writes a book to the dead in Rome, his monument to a foregone race. In the final scene, Verney decides to set out in his tiny boat to wander

“the shores of the deserted earth” (Shelley, 1993: 365) in the vain hope of finding another survivor. His intended course will take him back past Naples. The book is the narrative discovered initially in the frame in 1818. The book written by the last man is set somewhere around 2073. (Keeling, 2017: 81)

The book foregrounds narrative processes in a scientific and textual test of truth claims in order to establish what is fact and what is fiction. Ultimately, the self-conscious sharing of process breaks into parody and scepticism in its empirical approach. Indeed, all narrators are unreliable. A fact all too clear to the modern reader beset by social media filled with first-person narrator-witnesses. The story becomes a story about writing fiction, and about textually reading the past. These two complementary modes make Shelley’s novel an exercise in genre and form. The frame narrative incorporates scientific and textual practices into the novel’s method. In doing so it underlines the nature of narration as always mediated and unreliable. (Keeling, 2017: 90-91)

The frame initiates the broader scientific or epistemological question of how to read and critically interrogate the past and its sources.

This past, or future, we are about to be presented with is knowingly mediated, a conspiracy in which the reader is complicit. The reader is, however, presented with differing types of proofs with formal similarity to Buffon’s division of facts, monuments and traditions in describing the natural world. The facts are the observable details of what, we are told, we see: the present. The monuments are the antiquities of nature, that tell us the story of the past, and the traditions are the human stories, both oral and written: the sum of human collective experience.” (Keeling, 2017: 84-85)

The narrator attests to a critical textual approach in reassembling narrative from fragmentary evidence: “Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form.” (Shelley, 1993: 8) Indeed, the narrator expresses the wish to believe, despite “the English dress of the Latin poet” (Shelley, 1993: 8). Shelley’s narrator does claim historicity, but the reader detects a note of scepticism. Shelley seems to play on the claims of authors such as Defoe and Richardson who “pretend to be only the editors of authentic documents whose plain and artless truth is above question” (McKeon, 2000: 386). McKeon (2000: 385) terms this *naïve empiricism*. One of the cultural modes or movements McKeon describes as contributing to naive empiricism in championing “true history” is the scientific revolution (2000:

385). In *The Last Man*, the question of narrative being constructed and reconstructed informs the frame. Shelley produces a sceptical critique of the epistemological and practical modes of the scientific revolution, reproducing self-parody as found in Swift and Fielding. McKeon explains that this is how “naive empiricism generates its own, radically sceptical, critique” (McKeon, 2000: 386).” To the reader in 2020, the question of mediation as artless and analogous with McKeon’s naïve empiricism will evoke the continuous struggle with social media giants who claim that their medium is unmediated and unredacted i.e. artless truth. It may also conjure up the near-automated accusation of fake news levelled at redacted traditional media by authoritarian politicians. Shelley’s interrogation of the narrator’s role in the mediation of history remains unresolved and potentially unresolvable. If both the artlessly unredacted and the unreliably redacted poles of the continuum are not to be trusted then how can any consensus be achieved?

The main narrative, the story-within-story reconstructed creatively from the fragments, covers the period from 2073 when the republic is instituted and Verney, the last man and protagonist, is but a boy; the story as told by the first-person narrator-witness runs through roughly 2092 to 2100. Read at face value, it loops back to antiquity and presumably continues *ad infinitum*:

[...] a feeling experienced by all, understood by none—a feeling, as if in some state, less visionary than a dream, in some past real existence, I had seen all I saw, with precisely the same feelings as I now beheld them—as if all my sensations were a duplex mirror of a former revelation. (Shelley, 1993: 283)

Eternalist theories of the earth were indeed common in 1818, and Hutton’s was best known in the Britain of this period. This cosmological context is introduced in the frame narrative, where Shelley seems to vacillate between *naive* and *sceptical empiricism* (McKeon, 2000) and so destabilises truth claims, and, in so doing, any historicity. The frame, moreover, destabilises any linear or simple, directional time. In this sense, it reproduces dominant theories of the earth. The setting is redolent with the antiquities of the ancient world, but knowledge of nature in 1818 places Jameson’s Cuvier and Hutton as the main competing theories of earth in Britain. Moreover, by 1818, according to Secord, these two supposedly opposing models may well have been realigned by Jameson in the third edition of *Essay*.

*The Last Man* repeatedly interrogates knowledge of nature in 1818. Shelley drives an investigation of Buffonian proofs: facts, monuments and traditions; a meditation that, to some degree, makes the novel itself a putative theory of the earth. The narrator asks “Will the earth still keep her place among the planets? will she still journey with marked regularity around the sun” (Shelley, 1993: 320). Lionel Verney’s speech zooms in from universe to planet, through flora and fauna, rushing centripetally inwards; and yet man, “paragon of animals” fades (Shelley, 1993: 320). This appears toward the end of the last fellowship of humans on earth in Volume III. Protagonist Verney confronts an eternalist theory of the earth. He challenges the universe to intervene by some agency, natural or divine. The failed Lamarckian transformist model of evolutionary – and by extension political – change leaves the human protagonist without agency in an unknowable universe. But as the narrative draws inevitably toward the last human, facing extinction, it seems that a purely mechanical eternalism may destroy humanity. *The Last Man* vainly searches for proofs of providence or, at least, signs of a benign universe. But this search is cloaked in a sceptical critique of the novel’s pseudo-historical naive empiricism. (Keeling, 2017: 85-86) In many ways this central unreliability and instability of narrative is reprised in the experiences of modern readers in the pandemic of 2020. What does it matter if the we are led by the science if the story is framed by an inherently unstable and unreliable narrator?

### Proto-evolutionary science

Shelley’s reader knows that, although individuals and individuality are praised, ultimately, all are rendered equal before plague and extinction. This is the realization of a utopian ideal in dystopia, catastrophe and extinction. However, against this idea “that thus man remains, while we the individuals pass away” (Shelley, 1993: 180), linked in the text to Edmund Burke’s (Burke, 1910) organicist vision of “perpetual decay, fall, renovation and progression” (Shelley, 1993: 180), there is the survival narrative of the individual. It is the individual who survives to renovation and progression. In Cuvier and English catastrophism the individual, hero-like, passes on into eternity either as fossil remain or as species progenitor. This strain of proto-evolutionary science where genetic and cultural capital are passed along genealogically becomes dominant in Darwin. Verney, in contrast, is left to sail the world in search of a potential mate. In Lamarckian transformism, the

individual changes through both habit and habitat, potentially in a single lifetime giving individuals and groups true agency. These two counter-positioned – and then re-aligned – theories of the earth or natural philosophies, thriving in the broader political currents of 1820s Britain, create tension against the normative societal myth of origins in Shelley’s novel.

From Chapter V of Volume II onwards evidence of natural disasters multiply. This seemed outlandish and fantastically eschatological on reading in 2016. Four years later and the world has seemingly plunged into a constant state of climate crisis. Extreme weather events, landslides, earthquakes, forest fires: our house is literally on fire, as school-age Swedish activist Greta Thunberg emotionally reminded the United Nations. Indeed, what might once have read as incredulous now seems an eerily prescient prophesy. Chapter V begins with “disorder” in “the elements” (Shelley, 1993: 181), and the reader – just as Lionel does – must ask why there is this strange darkening of nature, which has “become dark, cold and ungenial” (Shelley, 1993: 181). “Why dost thou howl thus, O wind?” apostrophizes Lionel “By day and by night for four long months thy roarings have not ceased” (Shelley, 1993: 182). Why is the world in *The Last Man* subjected to such increasing extremes of weather? Even allowing for poetic licence in this description, *The Last Man* features natural disasters and climactic aberrations which have nothing to do with the plague narrative. But it is the effects of human civilization that are destroyed, not nature itself. The modern-day reader may reflect upon the fact that where just a short time ago it seemed humans were destroying the earth, now the reverse seems true: that nature has turned on its self-enthroned masters.

First, the “shores of the sea are strewn with wrecks” (Shelley, 1993: 182); the medium of human exploration and expansion, the sea, confounds mankind’s mastery of it. Second, the “frail balloon dares no longer sail on the agitated air”. Again, human mastery of the elements through technology and science is thwarted in *The Last Man*. Soon humans’ “very cities are wasted by thee” (Shelley, 1993: 182), Lionel continues to apostrophize. The destruction abroad is delivered at times in laconic fashion. Lionel labels as “mischief” the destruction of the Ecuadorian capital, Quito, at the hands of an earthquake. He notes that Mexico is “laid waste” by “storm, pestilence and famine” (Shelley, 1993: 184). The Black Death of 1348 is recollected, where it is estimated that a third of the world’s population was wiped out. This inurement to the excesses of natu-

ral disasters must seem familiar to the current reader dealing with daily death tolls from Covid-19 and the incomprehensible magnitude of a global pandemic. Our protagonist asks “Can it be true [...] that whole countries are laid waste, whole nations annihilated, by these disorders in nature?” To attribute patterns and laws in the natural world and creation to a creator, namely God, would have been quite normal and expected in the 1820s. But the decline in nature and the world has an unusually secular and naturalistic feel in *The Last Man*.

The compelling vision of darkness and a disrupted, hostile nature may owe a lot to the so-called Year without a Summer (1816) that gave rise to Shelley’s first novel, *Frankenstein* (1818) and Byron’s *Darkness* (1816). Mount Tambora’s eruption in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia) in 1815, after a great deal of volcanic activity in previous years, led to climactic aberrations in the summer of 1816 that are analogous to Shelley’s descriptions in *The Last Man*. In spite of the fact that both *The Last Man* and *Darkness* envisage a naturalistic worldwide catastrophe, there is one clear division in that Byron foresees in his “dream, which was not all a dream” an apocalyptic end-time to both mankind and world, even universe: “Darkness had no need of aid from them – She was the Universe”. Shelley’s vision incorporates climactic aberrations but no end for the natural world, only for the human one. In Byron’s nightmarish fantasy there is the cold comfort of an end-time encompassing both mankind and the universe. Byron’s poem echoes Erasmus Darwin’s long, scientific poem *The Botanic Garden* (1791) in which, referring to Herschel’s papers on the ‘Construction of the Heavens’ (1785 and 1789), the poet picks up on a vision of a universe in differing stages of growth and decay. A universe that, therefore, has an end:

Star after star from Heaven’s high arch shall rush,  
Sun sink on suns, and systems systems crush,  
Headlong, extinct, to one dark centre fall,  
And death and night and chaos mingle all!

Here the word ‘extinct’ encompasses a plurality of worlds; an annihilation of not only creatures and habitats, but of planets and star systems.’

When the English entourage arrive at Dover, nature is in uproar in a “tremendous war of air and water”. (Shelley, 1993: 287) Bailes (2015: 683) links this to Buckland’s diluvialism claiming Shelley “rejects the biblically and geologically founded deluge of the past as a possibility for the future destruction of humanity”. At Dover, as the

rear-guard of English survivors prepares to leave for Paris, there is grave turbulence in the natural world. The “tempestuous world of waters” (Shelley, 1993: 287) attacks the literal and symbolic defences of England as “vast fragments of the near earth fall with crash and roar into the deep” (Shelley, 1993: 287-288). Having established the expectation-set of end days, the text resists traditional apocalypse as a factual end of the world. Comets, celestial signs, flood waves, earthquakes, all manner of signs of apocalypse are empirically observed in the story. Yet for our protagonist, Lionel Verney, the last man, the “fall” is a gradual one in what may seem a Huttonian universe. This gradualism in decline speaks to our own current understanding and experience of global pandemic. As new spikes and second waves continue to rise before a vaccine is found, the global community awaits both the social and economic outcomes in terms of global recession in the wake of the continuing crisis. In short, there is no end in conflagration or deluge, in the traditional eschatological agencies of religious and scientific literature. Instead, it is a slow degradation and isolation just as Shelley poured her loss of companions and hope into the pages of *The Last Man*.

Two contradicting experiences and understandings of time provide plot tension: on the one hand, the foreboding of Cuvierian catastrophe, annihilation, destruction (Cuvier, 1813); on the other, the sense of time and space that is infinite—Hutton’s “no vestige of a beginning,—no prospect of an end” (Hutton, 1970; Playfair, 1802). In Volume II, when Lionel Verney soliloquises regarding the partygoers at Windsor—“Ye are all going to die, I thought; already your tomb is built up around you.” (Shelley, 1993: 189)—both a Cuvierian catastrophe and Huttonian eternity resonate. The coming Cuvierian extinction, of which both narrator-protagonist and audience know, will destroy the youths; but they will be buried in the earth for an eternity, in a world that, seemingly, has no end.

At the start of Volume III, Lionel Verney mocks—in self-deprecation—the very absence of conventional apocalyptic signs in nature:

Hear you not the rushing sound of the coming tempest? Do you not behold the clouds open, and destruction lurid and dire pour down on the blasted

earth? See you not the thunderbolt fall, and are deafened by the shout of heaven that follows its descent? Feel you not the earth quake and open with agonising groans, while the air is pregnant with shrieks and wailings, — all announcing the last days of man? No! none of these things accompanied our fall! (Shelley, 1993: 247)

### Conclusion

Shelley’s *The Last Man* deserves more attention in the current time of global pandemic. Firstly, because we all share the experience of narrator-witnesses caught in our own fictional narrative and version of reality. In our personal lives and in public arenas individuals are trapped between McKeon’s *naïve empiricism* that accepts the science and a *sceptical empiricism* that knows that the conveyors of science, experts and policy-making politicians, journalists and online activists, all have ulterior agendas and mediate the facts into fictions. We know this because our own lives are continuously mediated in public arenas in social media. Secondly, Shelley’s reworkings of nineteenth-century natural philosophy allow us to re-evaluate our relationship with nature from a paradigm before evolutionary theory. Shelley incorporates the Lamarckian transformism equated to revolutionary political movements that offered a chance of meditated change within people’s lifetimes. This is radically different to the now dominant Darwinian model of evolution where inheritance through the passing on of genetic material dominates evolutionary narratives. Indeed, both genetic and economic capital are transferred as inheritance through procreation and resultant familial connections, as opposed to the Lamarckian models of proto-evolutionary science that promised change through human agency. In *The Last Man*, Shelley presents us with a different narrative of natural history where humans are effectively decentred in an eternalist Huttonian universe in addition to facing extinction in a Cuvierian model of catastrophe. Shelley’s protagonist faced the loss of hope in political change with the ultimate failure of the French Revolution. Today, we may do well to consider Shelley’s warnings in our own context dominated by capitalist and Darwinian ideologies. *The Last Man* is a warning that “death fell on man alone”; a warning from 200 years ago we would do well to heed.

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